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ABSTRACT

Observing that plot and character changes in the daytime television serials has increased the teen and preteen share of soap opera audiences, a study compared demographic, personal experience, and attitudinal variables among adolescent soap opera fans, occasional viewers, and nonviewers. Data were collected from 230 students in the classrooms of four school systems, including a suburban and rural district in West Virginia, a rural area in New Hampshire, and a manufacturing town in Massachusetts. Variables included current and past soap opera viewing habits, other viewing habits, family and peer relationships, future aspirations, attitudes toward soap operas, and demographics. The results indicated that significantly more females view soap operas than do males. Occasional viewers and fans of soap operas watch more television overall than do soap opera nonviewers of either sex, and had been watching television for a significantly greater number of years than soap opera nonviewers. Adolescents who do not live with both parents watch more soap operas than do those living with both parents. Occasional viewers and nonviewers of soap operas were less likely than fans to have experienced peer relationships, such as going steady or fighting with friends. Viewing habits did not appear to affect future aspirations. Fans held more positive attitudes toward the genre than did occasional and nonviewers. The results indicated that adolescent soap opera viewers and nonviewers do not differ dramatically from one another. (HTH)

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Profiling the Adolescent Soap Opera Viewer

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Just over a decade ago, soap operas were slow-moving melodramas that dwelled on the trials and tribulations of middle-aged characters. The introduction of new serials, such as "The Young and the Restless" and the revamping of old soaps, such as "General Hospital," dramatically changed the genre by injecting the plots with more action, adventure, and romance, and by shifting emphasis to much younger characters. As a result, the audience for soap operas changed, with teens and preteens constituting an increasing share of the audience. Neilsen ratings reveal that upward of three million adolescents view soap operas daily (Cantor & Pingree, 1983).

Though teens and, especially preteens, are making up an increasing share of the audience for soap operas, very little is known about this viewing group. Lots of popular literature suggest that soap opera viewing has a negative impact, particularly upon the young people watching them. The attack on soap operas is three-pronged. First, critics charge the content of soap operas with an array of "crimes," ranging from the slow and talky pace of the plots in these serials to the steamy sexual entanglements of their characters (Fine, 1981; Goldsen, 1975). Second, critics worry about the impact of such content upon the behavior of viewers, particularly young ones, speculating that soap operas "warp" viewers' sense of reality. Finally, commentary on the soap opera viewing audience depicts such individuals as being true "vidiots" or as being attracted to the genre

because events in their personal lives (such as poor relationships with friends and family) motivate them to seek "love in the afternoon." In an overall review of the popular literature concerning soap opera viewing, Greenberg et al. (1982) revealed that the soap opera viewing audience possessed the following attributes: they are lonely and alienated; they find soap operas to be realistic; they seek behavioral guidance from soap operas; and they find their lives dull in comparison to the lives led by soap opera characters.

Taken together, these charges would indicate that the adolescent soap opera viewer is an easily discernible subset of the overall adolescent population. Not all of the criticism of soap opera viewing is as bleak as described above, however. Hahn (1983) reported that teenage soap opera viewing is related to lower drug use, the explantion being that soap opera viewing and drug use provide similar escape functions for adolescents. Lanen (1983) proposed that teenage soap opera viewers see many positive depictions of personal relationships, the learning of which can be applied to their own developing notions about interpersonal relations.

Some recent work has investigated the impact of adolescent soap opera viewing (Alexander, 1985). Such research demonstrates that adolescent soap opera viewers and non-viewers do differ in their perceptions about relationships in the real world. One as yet unexamined

explanation for such differences is that adolescent soap opera viewers and non-viewers are categorically different. Perhaps they differ in terms of demographic characteristics. Perhaps adolescent soap opera viewers have less successful experiences with their friends or in school which motivates them to seek escape in soap operas. Perhaps adolescent soap opera viewers come from families with interpersonal conflict, or from homes without two parents. The present investigation profiles the adolescent soap opera viewer, comparing demographic, personal experience, and attitudinal variables among adolescent soap opera fans, occasional viewers, and nonviewers.

METHOD

Data were collected from 230 students in the classrooms of four school systems including a suburban and rural district in West Virginia, a rural area in New Hampshire, and a manufacturing town in Massachusetts. Parental or student permission was high, resulting in a completion rate exceeding 95%. The sample included 99 sixth graders and 131 seventh graders. Respondents ranged in age from 10 to 14; 111 (48.3%) were female, 119 (51.7%) were male. The mean age was 12.19 (SD = .81).

Viewing Variables. Current and past soap opera viewing were measured: 19.5% watched soap operas daily, 10% watched more than once a week, 29.4% watched occasionally, and 41.2% almost never viewed. This ordinal-level measure of frequency of current viewing was compared to a second measure of the number of episodes of each serial viewed in a "typical week." The list included the 14 network soap operas airing in each of the data-collection areas. To assess consistency, answers to both sets of questions were compared and a single soap opera exposure measure was constructed. Of all respondents, 146 (51 male, 95 female) respondents claimed to watch at least one soap opera in a typical week. Of these, 57 (16 male, 41 female) watched almost daily, while the remaining 89 (35 male, 54 female) were occasional viewers who watched on less than a daily

basis. Seventy-one non-viewers (59 male, 12 female) reported no, or only rare, soap opera viewing. This analysis provided a sample of 217 adolescents.1

Students were also asked to estimate when they began watching soaps. This was subtracted from their age to provide length of exposure. Answers ranged from 0 to 12 years, with a mean of 3.10 years (SD = 2.77). Much of children's occasional viewing occurred during school vacations. However, children also were typically home by 3 p.m. Other regular watching occurred during lunch hours, from videocassette recorders, or during free periods at school. "General Hospital" was the most frequently watched serial. (GH has tried to attract a younger audience by the addition of teen-related story lines; it also airs at 3 p.m., after school.)

Finally, to determine the separate contributions of soap opera viewing versus other television viewing, soap opera viewing was subtracted from overall television viewing.2 Thus, three viewing measures were developed: amount of current soap opera viewing (SOEXP), years viewing soap operas (YEARS), and non-serial daily viewing.

Experience Variables: Family, Peer, Life Events. In lieu of asking about perceived relational difficulties in the home, students were asked to indicate with whom they lived. Most students lived with both parents (n = 146). Also represented were: (a) homes in which the child lived with neither parent, typically relatives or foster parents (n =

9); (b) single parent households (n = 58); and (c) reconstructed families (parent and stepparent) (n = 17). These figures were used to construct a scale (HOME) in which children who lived with both parents were given a score of 1, children from single parent households or in reconstructed families were scored as 2, and children who lived with neither parent were scored as 3. Thus, an ordinal-level variable was created in which family structure was used as a surrogate measure for experience with difficult family relations. 3 Students were also asked to indicate with whom they lived (for example, mom, dad, 2 brothers). These responses were counted to provide a measure of number of people living in the home.

Respondents were also asked to list their clubs and hobbies. These responses were added to provide a measure of number of activities. An index of experience with peer relationships was constructed from responses to questions about life events. Students responded to a modified version of Cochrane and Robertson's (1973) stress inventory of life events. Items from the inventory were modified for clarity and age appropriateness and were balanced by adding "positive" experiences (including academic and social successes). Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they had ever experienced (0 = not experienced, 1 = experienced) each of the resulting 11 events. All items were subjected to a principal components factor analysis with oblique rotation.4 From the four factors that emerged,

Factor 3 (RELATE) clearly reflected experience with peer relationships including going steady and having fights with close friends. Two additional factors, AWARDS and SCHOOL revealed additional information about peer integration and academic success, and were included for further analysis. The RELATE, AWARDS, and SCHOOL measures were created by summing over the weighted and standardized score on the loaded items, and dividing by the total number of items that loaded on that factor.

Respondents indicated on 5-point Likert scales (1 = not very important; 5 = very important) their agreement with 19 statements about future aspirations. Principal components analysis with oblique rotation was used to factor analyze responses to these statement of viewing motives. Four factors resulted from this analysis, and were labeled CITIZEN, being a helpful, useful, informed member of society, RECOGNITION, being popular or famous, FAMILY, having a happy marriage and raising a family, and CAREER, having a successful, profitable career.

Soap opera attitudes. Respondents indicated on 5-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) their agreement with 14 motives for viewing soap operas. Items were derived from and results were categorized according to previous research on soap opera viewing (Carveth & Alexander, 1985; Greenberg et al, 1982)

RESULTS

Demographics. Significantly more females view soap operas than do males. Of the females, 38.3% were fans (n = 41), 50.5% were occasional viewers (n = 54), and 11.2% never viewed (n = 12). Although fewer males watch soap operas, a substantial proportion do view. Of the males, 14.5% were fans (n =16), 31.8% were occasional viewers (n = 35), and 53.6% were non-viewers (n = 59). There were no significant differences between viewers and nonviewers on other demographic variables (age, race, religion). However, this study sampled a limited range of variability across these demographic categories.

Since gender was such an important demographic category, results were analyzed for each individual variable using a 2X3 (gender by soap opera viewing group) analysis of variance design. Each table reports main and interaction effects in upper case letters. Post hoc analysis of significant differences between cell means was conducted using the Student Newman-Keuls test and are reported in lower case superscripts.

Television viewing. As shown in Table 1, occasional viewers and fans of soap operas view more television overall than do nonviewers of either sex. However, when soap opera viewing time is subtracted from overall television viewing to produce a measure of non-serial viewing, no significant differences emerge between serial viewers and nonviewers.

Thus soap opera viewers are not viewing as part of an overall heavier viewing of television, in general.

Years viewing. As shown in Table 1, analysis of variance indicates that, in general, nonviewers of soap operas have watched for significantly fewer years than have occasional viewers and fans. One might expect, given the demographics of serial viewership that women would begun watching at a younger age than men. This was not found to be the case. It should be noted that this question asked viewers to estimate when they first began watching soaps. It does not assume continued viewing in the intervening years.

Family Structure. As shown in Table 2, two-way analysis of variance reveals a significant main effect for home life (HOME), suggesting that adolescents who do not live with both parents watch somewhat more soap operas than do adolescents who do. No significant differences were found among soap opera viewers based on the size of the family with whom the adolescent lived.

Peer Relationships. There is a significant effect for soap opera viewing in the number of clubs to which a student belongs, such that more viewing is linked to fewer club memberships. However, this relationship does not hold for hobbies.

Experience with peer relationships (RELATE), including going steady and fighting with friends, is significantly related to soap opera exposure such that fans are more likely to have experienced these relationship experiences

than are nonviewers or occasional viewers. (Although the pattern is clear, significance is less so, due to issues of statistical power).

No significant differences were found for the variables of AWARDS or SCHOOL, indicating that soap opera viewing and these aspects of adolescent integration and comptence were not related.

In terms of future aspirations, no signficant main effects were found for soap opera viewing for any of the four aspiration factors (CITIZEN, RECOGNITION, FAMILY, CAREER). A main effect for gender was found for the CAREER variable, indicating higher career aspirations for males. No other significant differences emerged.

Attitudes toward soap operas. Table 3 reveals some major consistencies in attitudes toward soap operas. To be specific, in all cases there were significant main effects for sex and for soap opera exposure. In only one case were there interaction effects. To oversimplify only somewhat, occasional viewers and fans of soap operas were more positive in their evaluation of the genre than were nonviewers. Similarly, female respondents agreed more strongly with the attitude statements than did male respondents overall. For women fans, the strongest support was found for the following four statements: soap opera viewing is a habit, soap operas are thrilling, I just enjoy watching, and I talk about them with my friends. Female occasional viewers had these top four reasons: I enjoy

watching, soap operas are thrilling, I like to keep informed about the characters, and I like to talk about them with my friends. Male fans and occasional viewers had the same top four reasons to view soaps: to see how others live, to keep informed about characters, and because they are thrilling and enjoyed.

DISCUSSION

The major finding of this investigation is that adolescent soap opera viewers and non-viewers do not differ dramatically from one another. Demographically, adolescent viewers and non-viewers differ in only one characteristic: gender. This finding should not be surprising in that soap operas have historically been considered a female genre of television programming. Previous research on elementary school children's viewing of soap opera (Alexander & Carveth, 1985) revealed that boys who view soap operas are often taunted for "watching a girl's show."

Adolescent soap opera viewers and non-viewers do significantly differ in the amount of television they view. The analyses reveal, however, that soap opera viewing is a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, other television viewing. There is some trend in this sample to suggest that soap opera viewing serves as a functional alternative to other activities, but the trend is not a significant one. Not surprisingly, fans consistently rate soap operas more favorably on a variety of received gratifications and female fans give them the highest ratings.

Adolescent soap opera viewers tend more often to come from homes without two parents than do non-viewers. Two explanations for this finding can be easily compared: that adolescents are seeking information relevant to their family

problems or that these viewers have fewer options in terms of extra-curricular activities, and thus choose soap opera viewing from a more limited range of choices than non-viewers have. Perhaps a more intriguing finding is that adolescent soap opera fans are significantly more interested in and involved in interpersonal relationships than are either occasional or nonviewers. Once again, one can posit either a cause or effect rationale for this finding. Perhaps this awakening interest is motivating these adolescents to seek out information about relationships wherever it may be found, including soaps. Alternately, watching soaps may be making them more interested in seeking out close interpersonal relationships.

Aside from these differences, viewers and nonviewers share more than they differ. No significant differences emerge between these viewing groups for such important aspects of adolescent experience as winning awards, performing competently in school, and aspirations for the future. This strongly suggests that teen soap opera viewers are not an easily discernible subset of the adolescent population, nor do we find evidence that they are less socially integrated than their nonviewing cohorts.

This profile of the adolescent viewer suggests some distinguishing characteristics such as a keen interest in family and peer relationships. However, our profile does not match the popular literature portrayal of the adolescent viewer as lonely, isolated, frustrated, and unmotivated.

Although many more questions remain to be answered concerning the adolescent soap opera viewer, popular fears about the soap opera viewing experience are probably exagerated.

Footnotes

1. The total of 217 reflects a conservative approach in assessing the consistency of responses to the exposure measures. For example, if a respondent claimed in one question to watch "almost never" but reported viewing 8 episodes of soap operas in a typical week, he or she was omitted from the sample. Throughout the article, percentages are based on the numbers of usable answers.

2. The non-serial daily viewing variable was constructed by (a) converting the number of soap opera episodes viewed per week into the number of soap operas viewed per week, noting that some serials are hour-long and others one-half hour in length; (b) converting daily television viewing to weekly viewing by multiplying by seven; and (c) subtracting the number of hours of soap viewing per week from the number of television hours viewed per week. It should be noted that these values should be considered as relative, rather than absolute.

3. This indirect measure of family difficulty was mandated by school system refusal to allow more direct questions. Principals and superintendents are increasingly wary of allowing lines of questionning to which parents may object.

4. Four factors resulted that explained 55.6% of the total variance. Requirements for factor retention included an eigenvalue of 1.0 and a minimum of two items with a

primary loading of at least .50 and no secondary loading as high as .35. Statements that loaded on each of the four social experience factors, along with their means and standard deviations, are as follows. Factor 1, AWARDS (eigenvalue = 1.89): Have you won a prize or award at sports or some other leisure activity (M = .90, SD = .30), Gotten an "A" in a course (M = .89, SD = .31), Won a prize or award for academic success (M = .57, SD = .50)? Factor 2, MOVE (eigenvalue = 1.73): Have you changed schools (M = .68, SD = .47), Moved to a new neighborhood (M = .70, SD = .46)? Factor 3, RELATE (eigenvalue = 1.28): Had a falling out with someone you were really close to (M = .60, SD = .49), Gone steady with someone (M = .49, SD = .50)? Factor 4, SCHOOL (eigenvalue = 1.22): Have you failed a course (reverse scored)(M = .26, SD = .44), Completed your homework assignments regularly (M = .81, SD = .39)?

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TABLE 1

Mean Scores for Male and Female Fans, Occasional Viewers and Non-Viewers on Viewing Variables

	MALE			FEMALE		
	Non-Viewers (N=59)	Occasional Viewers (N=35)	Fans (N=16)	Non-Viewers (N=12)	Occasional Viewers (N=54)	Fans (N=41)
Hours of TV per day[B]	3.95[a]	4.97[ab]	6.13[b]	3.08[a]	4.50[ab]	5.54[b]
Hours of nonserial viewing per day[A]	3.93[ab]	4.29[bcd]	4.91[d]	3.06[a]	3.60[abc]	3.89[cd]
Years since first viewing soaps[B]	2.03[a]	3.88[b]	3.69[ab]	1.09[a]	3.33[b]	3.78[b]

Note: Groups that do not share an upper case superscript in common differ significantly from one another at $p < .05$

A= significant main effect for gender
B= significant main effect for viewing group
C= significant interaction of gender x viewing group

Cells that do not share a lower case superscript in common differ significantly from one another at $p < .05$ according to Student-Newman-Keuls post-hoc test for differences.

TABLE 2

Mean Scores for Male and Female Fans, Occasional Viewers and Non-Viewers on Family, Peer, Life Event and Future Aspiration Variables

	MALE			FEMALE		
	Non-Viewers (N=59)	Occasional Viewers (N=35)	Fans (N=16)	Non-Viewers (N=12)	Occasional Viewers (N=54)	Fans (N=41)
Family						
Home Type[B]	3.36	3.51	3.06	3.67	3.41	3.00
Family Size	3.47	3.29	3.44	3.68	3.66	3.29
Peers						
Clubs[B]	1.27	0.91	0.75	1.75	0.96	1.02
Hobbies	2.61	2.51	2.81	2.50	2.63	2.44
RELATE[B]	-0.15	-0.12	0.34	-0.26	-0.10	0.48
Life Events						
AWARDS	-0.40	-0.08	0.22	-0.31	0.04	-0.11
SCHOOL	-0.16	-0.20	0.26	0.38	0.17	0.04
Future Aspirations						
CITIZEN	3.98	4.08	4.09	4.13	4.02	4.07
RECOGNITION	3.94	3.77	3.96	3.89	3.62	3.89
FAMILY	4.38	4.56	4.56	4.55	4.44	4.45
CAREER[B]	4.73	4.64	4.71	4.36	4.48	4.48

Note: Groups that do not share an upper case superscript in common differ significantly from one another at $p < .05$

A= significant main effect for gender
B= significant main effect for viewing group
C= significant interaction of gender x viewing group

Cells that do not share a lower case superscript in common differ significantly from one another at $p < .05$ according to Student-Newman-Keuls post-hoc test for differences.

TABLE 3

Mean Scores for Male and Female Fans, Occasional Viewers and Non-Viewers on Received Gratifications for Soap Opera Viewing

	MALE			FEMALE		
	Non-Viewers (N=59)	Occasional Viewers (N=35)	Fans (N=16)	Non-Viewers (N=12)	Occasional Viewers (N=54)	Fans (N=41)
Involvement						
Rather watch[A,B] anything else	1.25[a]	1.71[ab]	2.19[bc]	1.33[a]	2.20[cd]	3.17[d]
Feel lost[A,B] without soaps	1.28[a]	1.71[ab]	2.31[b]	1.25[a]	2.11[b]	3.12[c]
Learning						
See how[A,B] others live	1.71[a]	2.43[b]	3.44[c]	2.17[ab]	2.78[b]	3.61[c]
Soaps show[A,B] life as is	1.54[a]	2.02[b]	2.13[ab]	2.08[ab]	2.22[b]	2.60[b]
Teaches me[A,B]	1.59[a]	2.21[b]	2.25[ab]	1.83[ab]	2.72[b]	3.00[b]
Character Involvement						
Informed re:[A,B,C] characters	1.63[a]	2.56[b]	3.75[c]	2.33[b]	3.30[c]	3.68[c]
See chars.[A,B] as friends	1.51[a]	1.97[b]	2.69[bcd]	2.00[abc]	2.48[cd]	2.85[c]
Conversational Currency						
Talk about[A,B] soaps with friends	1.49[a]	1.97[b]	2.56[bc]	2.17[ab]	3.10[c]	3.83[d]
Excitement						
Thrilling[A,B]	1.45[a]	2.44[b]	3.50[cd]	1.67[a]	3.20[c]	3.88[d]
Enjoy[A,B] watching	1.56[a]	2.32[b]	3.50[c]	2.08[ab]	3.46[c]	4.44[d]